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ARTICLE

Amah Activism: Domestic Servants and Decolonization in 1960s Malaysia and Singapore

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The privatized nature of employment as a domestic servant is often inimical to collective action.[1] Yet in the early 1960s there was significant trade union interest in the working conditions of female domestic servants in Singapore and Malaya.[2] Studies of female domestic service in Malaya (later Malaysia) and Singapore are dominated by work focusing on Chinese-born servants before the Second World War, and migrant maids associated with economic transformation from the late 1970s.[3] If scholarship on pre-war domestic servants leans toward an emphasis on agency, then studies of maids from the 1980s tend toward experiences of abjection. What of the intervening period, during the Cold War, when rapid decolonization introduced new factors into the demography, structure, and regulation of domestic service in Malaysia and Singapore? Did this provide opportunity for greater autonomy, mimic older colonial relationships, or herald new protections for domestic servants in the modern postcolonial state? The considerable historical literature devoted to the relationship between imperial power, colonialism, and domestic service rarely extends to the persistence and dynamics of domestic service in the era of decolonization between the 1950s and the 1970s, although it does explore the increasing feminization of the occupation.[4] This article explores a confluence of factors—the politics of anticolonialism, economic dependence, and apprehension about the privacy of the home—that cohered in a controversy in the 1960s known as the "amah strike," when female domestic servants in Singapore and Malaya threatened to walk off the job over a proposed change to their employment conditions.[5]

As Malaya and Singapore transitioned to independence from the late 1950s, the number of domestic servants working for Western employers boomed. Malaya and Singapore remained deeply involved with their former colonial power, Britain, and its Commonwealth allies, particularly in matters of defense. Consequently, thousands of British, Australian, and New Zealand military families resided in the region as part of the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve (1955–1971) and were major employers of local female domestic servants. Now commonly referred to as maids, for much of the twentieth century in Southeast Asia, female domestic servants who cared for children, cooked, and cleaned in family homes were known as amahs.[6] Almost all military families employed at least one amah, as did other expatriate Westerners and middle- and upper-class Malaysian and Singaporean families, who were increasing in

number and competing with overseas military families for their services.[7] Domestic service retained its conceptual slipperiness in the new context: servants were employees, but were often intimately involved in family life and enmeshed in personal relationships.[8] The amahs, who are the focus of this article, worked for Western military families, but the official response to their campaign about working conditions was premised on the assumption that any recognition of union representation, or codification of their conditions, would ultimately impact the domestic service workforce as a whole.

When it became evident from the early 1960s that Britain's appetite for pump-priming its overseas garrison communities was on the wane, local trade unions were attuned to the irony that many of their members were financially dependent on the economies that surrounded British bases. By 1962, in Singapore alone, forty thousand people, or 9 percent of the working population, depended on the military base for their livelihoods.[9] Committed to an anticolonial agenda, trade unionists nevertheless insisted that amahs who worked for foreign military families should be employed directly by the British War Department.[10] The response to a British proposal in the early 1960s to effectively end this arrangement by transferring amahs onto private contracts with individual families revealed trade unionists as willing to embrace previously overlooked constituencies, the tenacity of state resistance to labor protections for domestic workers, and the paradox of relationships deemed neocolonial in some contexts offering greater entitlements for local workers in another. Ostensibly a moment when the male-dominated union movement took heed of female workers, a closer examination of the issue, based on the archival records of the British administration now housed in the National Archive in the United Kingdom, vernacular and English-language newspaper accounts in Singapore and Malaysia, and oral history interviews with key actors, reveals it to be a more complex touchstone for contemporary anxieties about workers' rights and unionism.[11] Anticommunist governments aligned with the West were concerned with curbing the influence of unions on the functioning of labor, and their British and Commonwealth supporters were chary of cost and obligation to an increasingly anachronistic footprint in Asia. Both appealed to the sanctity of the home as a private space that should not be subject to regulation by either the state or unionized labor.

Thousands of civilian women were employed annually as amahs for service families by the British War Department in Malaya and Singapore at the peak of British commitment to its military bases in southeast Asia in the 1960s. Some were the famous *maijie* ("black and white") amahs, Cantonese women named for their distinctive uniform of a long white blouse over black pants required by European employers.[12] Those women had migrated from the Kwantung region in southern China in the 1930s to work in the wealthy Chinese and European households of Singapore, Malaya, and Hong Kong, and were beginning to retire or return to China.[13] The next wave of migrant domestic workers did not arrive in large numbers until the 1980s and were more likely to come from Indonesia and the Philippines. In between these two migrant groups sit the domestic servants of the 1960s and 1970s, which included the *maijie* but increasingly included locally-born women.[14] There was no distinct break between the dominance of the *maijie* amahs and the emergence of a locally-born domestic service workforce in the transitional period of the 1960s and 1970s; the ranks of amahs at this time included both groups.

In the debates that surrounded the decision to privatize the employment conditions of amahs who worked for the services, the voices of women themselves remain elusive. In the pre-war period, male domestic servants in Singapore and Malaya had engaged in public and labor activism around wages and working conditions, influenced by their links to communism and transcolonial networks of Chinese nationalists.[15] Public protest about matters relating to the employment conditions of domestic servants then entered a period of relative quietude as the labor force transformed from one dominated by men, to one offering employment predominantly to women. By the 1930s, with changes to immigration laws that restricted the number of men from China but placed no similar quota on women, domestic service became an increasingly feminized profession, a trend that would only grow stronger in the postwar period. The immigrant Chinese women who dominated the ranks of domestic servants up to the 1960s may have been less forthright in public than their male predecessors but were not known for their passivity. On the contrary, committed to life as single women, they had a reputation for independence and formed robust mutual support networks through social institutions such as lodging houses (*kongsi pan*).[16] Women born in Malaya and Singapore, who began to replace them as they retired, had less strong communal bonds, were not celibate, and evinced more interest in unions and staff associations of employees who worked for the British. While there are no official statistics about the ethnicity of amahs who joined such union activity, the names of those publicly associated with the campaign suggest ethnic Chinese and Indian backgrounds. Although working amahs formed part of delegations that met with senior British, Malayan, and Singaporean officials during the dispute about their employment conditions, male union officials did most of the talking. The vernacular and English-language press reported their statements, as they spoke on behalf of amahs. Likewise, male union leaders corresponded with government and military authorities on the amahs' behalf.

The dominance of male union leaders in public activism around amahs' employment conditions intersected with the politics of decolonization in Malaysia and Singapore. The dispute was contemporaneous with debates about the formation of Malaysia, and tension over the place of trade unions in the new nation, particularly in Singapore. Although the Federation of Malaya had been independent since 1957, and Singapore had achieved full self-government in 1959, defense agreements negotiated between Malaya and Great Britain in the context of the immaturity of Malaya's own defense forces, and a pro-Western anticommunist Malayan government, allowed Britain to maintain overseas military bases and troops for security and defense purposes.[17] Negotiations for Singapore to join with Malaya, North Borneo, and Sarawak to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 were also premised on Britain maintaining a strong military presence in the region.[18] Both Great Britain and Malaya viewed Singapore, the site of an active, anticolonial labor movement, with its demographic preponderance of ethnic Chinese, as potentially vulnerable to communist influence. The project to create "Greater Malaysia" offered an opportunity for Lee Kuan Yew, leader of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore, to distinguish himself from his internal political rivals. Viewed as a neocolonialist project by the Left of the labor movement, but backed by Lee Kuan Yew, the Malaysia issue split the PAP, leading to the formation of a new political party, the Barisan Sosialis.[19] The trade union

leaders who took on the cause of the amahs in Singapore were aligned with the Barisan Sosialis, ultimately leading to a ready dismissal of their support for domestic servants as a stalking-horse for communist ambition.

Service Amahs

British military garrisons had long employed civilians to support the activities of the base and its associated service personnel, but the arrangements under which female domestic servants were employed by the British Services in the "Far East" for almost two decades after the end of the Second World War were unique.[20] The British Services had often provided allowances, or pay allotments, for domestic servants to servicemen in other places where "conditions of life and climate," which was usually code for colonial settings with majority African or Asian populations in tropical climates, made it desirable.[21] Domestic servants had long been a way of establishing or asserting white prestige, and the military were keen to follow suit and employ them as reflecting "the generally accepted practices of Europeans in the Area" where troops were stationed, even as formal empire began to be dismantled.[22] In Southeast Asia the practice was taken one step further and British servicemen were provided with an amah who was paid for directly by the service themselves. Similar privileges were extended to Australian and New Zealand service personnel. Liability for wages and other conditions of service for amahs was undertaken by the either the navy, the army or the air force—represented by the British War Department—on behalf of individual servicemen.

There was a particular set of circumstances and assumptions prevailing in the immediate postwar years in regions of Southeast Asia that had been under Japanese occupation during the Second World War that led British officials to directly employ female domestic servants. British authorities wanted to "exercise control" in relation to the "health and suitability for employment" of domestic servants in Malaya and Singapore.[23] Wary of women who might sympathize with the communist insurrection that lay of the heart of the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), the British services were determined to vet women who entered the domestic realm of British families. Moreover, the policy was established at a time when most of the forces sent to the "Far East" were young conscripts for national service, and hence living in barrack accommodation rather than in family groups with personal domestic servants. The arrangement was therefore anticipated to remain at a relatively small scale. It was also racially circumscribed: the provision of servants appears to have been exclusively for British, Australian, and New Zealand troops. Although some Gurkhas stationed in Malaya were accompanied by their wives and children, they lived in camp lines with communal cooking facilities and did not have servants allocated to them.[24]

As Britain's economy failed to fire in the 1960s, the extent of British government expenditure on the old empire, and especially its overseas military commitments, was under review. In 1963, the total operating costs for all the British Army, Air Force, and Navy forces and bases in Singapore and Malaya was estimated to be £100 million per annum, although no one in the Civil Service was really quite sure of the exact figure.[25] Nor did they much seem to care. Despite increasing disquiet about the

cost in the press and Parliament, the Ministry of Defence considered that the "general military situation" meant that the stationing of troops overseas was nothing less than a necessity, and that it was "interesting rather than valuable . . . to know precisely what a unit in a particular place costs."[26] Such an attitude was alarming to the British Parliamentary Committee on Estimates, which visited the region in late 1963, and catalogued the eye-watering cost of maintaining garrison communities and their associated accommodation, swimming pools, social clubs, cinemas, hospitals, and schools, most of which were constructed on land of insecure tenure. The commissioners were astonished to learn that in Singapore and Hong Kong alone (excluding Malaya) that year, eight thousand seven hundred amahs were employed by the services, at the combined cost to the "British taxpayer" of almost £1.4 million per annum.[27] The more financially literate overseers of national budgets wondered how garrison communities on such a scale could be squared with the changing nature of warfare, which required highly mobile units and the availability of air travel for both ease of movement and return visits, and where hampered by the security considerations innate to establishing expatriate communities of women and children in potential trouble-spots.[28] The practice of providing government-employed domestic servants for overseas troops began to be seen by Whitehall bureaucrats in a new light—as a luxury from a bygone colonial era. Further, by the early 1960s it was clear that the insurgency of the early postwar years had passed, obviating the previous desire to carefully monitor those who entered the domestic realm of service families.[29]

The announcement that by 1964 amahs would become private, rather than public, employees by transferring onto private contracts with individual servicemen caused considerable anxiety in Singapore and Malaysia. Although the services were at pains to point out that servicemen would receive an increased allowance to continue to employ servants, there was no mechanism to ensure that they would do so. The British authorities were quite clear that although servicemen would receive an amah allowance, the use of that allowance was at individual discretion and the serviceman could not be compelled to employ an amah.[30] They were keen to stress that the domestic servants could not be considered a "permanent body of employees" in "normal industrial and non-industrial grades."[31] Although the War Department had been the formal employer, ultimately oversight was lax: the serviceman most often individually arranged hours and conditions of service, engaged, and discharged the servant, who could also move freely between private employment and employment with a service family.[32] This inherent flexibility meant that there had been high rates of turnover among domestic servants who worked for the services. The authorities thought this fluidity meant only a small number of domestic servants were members of a union prior to the decision to change the basis of their employment. Continued employment and rates of pay were one issue, longer-term entitlements another. While employed by the services in Singapore, contributions of 8 percent of annual salary were also made on the servants' behalf to the Central Provident Fund, a pension and hardship fund.[33] At a time when the place of unions in the newly-minted Federation of Malaysia was still in flux, and both the British High Commission and independent governments remained wary of socialist or communist influence, the transition from a public to private employer of a particularly vulnerable group of workers was set to become an issue of intense public interest.

Malaysia

The War Department Civilian Staff Association (WDCSA), a union representing ten thousand workers, took up the cause of the amahs. The WDCSA was inclined to see the fate of amahs as a dress rehearsal for British intentions to begin mass retrenchments of their civilian employees as they began to wind-down their commitment to Malaysia in the years after its independence.[34] It staged an industrial campaign in the latter half of 1963. In August, following a march of one thousand amahs through the streets of Kuala Lumpur, a telegram was sent to Queen Elizabeth II asking her to intervene in the dispute.[35] The president of the WDCSA, Syed Jafer Hussain Zaidi, claimed that it was the first time that police had given permission for a trade union protest march in Kuala Lumpur.[36] Zaidi (1924–2011) was a Muslim born in northern India who had joined the civilian staff of the British Army and went to Malaya at the conclusion of the Second World War. Active in the WDSCA from the 1950s, Zaidi and was both president of the WDSCA and secretary-general of the Malaysian Trade Union Congress.[37] After the march, Zaidi met with the British High Commissioner, Sir Geoffrey Tory, and argued that the British were trying to take the "easy way out" of responding to calls for better working conditions by privatizing the labor, and attempting to weaken the political will of the amahs, by forcing them to fend for themselves.[38] He wanted an assurance that conditions of service for amahs would be upheld when they transferred to private contracts. Zaidi claimed there would be "a lot of abuse and ill-treatment of amahs if Servicemen were responsible for their employment."[39] He was critical that the War Department had singled out the amahs for such treatment; thousands of other workers would effectively remain government employees. Zaidi interpreted it as a divide and rule strategy by the British, "which the white man has practised in the past." He called the Commonwealth Services in Malaya "arrogant, adamant, unsympathetic and anti-union."[40]

The Commonwealth Forces attempted to fight back by engaging in a public relations war with the WDCSA. They appealed to the sanctity of the home as a private space that should not be subject to regulation by either the state or unionized labor. The WDCSA were attempting to place amahs on the same footing as civil servants by demanding fixed conditions of service. "No household in Malaya," a British Army public relations statement issued on behalf of the three services and the Commonwealth Forces insisted, "would stand for this interference in their private lives."[41] The statement listed four points which the services refused to accede to the union:

Families should be compelled to employ an amah;

Families should be deprived of freedom to choose their amahs;

They should continue to employ amahs for up to two months should they be discharged;

The discharge of amahs should be subject to the agreement of some union official.[42]

Any talk of strike action was provocative and undermined the overall tenor of the "friendly family-amah relationship." The statement concluded with a threat that if strikes did proceed "families may find it more convenient not to employ an amah than to suffer this interference in their homes."[43]

The service families that employed amahs also took to the newspapers. "A service wife" from Malacca resented Zaidi's implication that amahs were abused or overworked by their employers. She complained that there were actually very few "good and properly trained amahs," and those that were ended up very well treated indeed. "Who pays for the burnt dresses? Not the amah and not the union but the poor housewife." "There are black sheep in every family," she insisted, and pointed out that if an amah were unhappy, she could complain to the military authorities or a union official. There were military families who had been deprived of amah service after reports of such behavior and this soon brought them to heel.[44] Unwittingly, the letter demonstrated the very vulnerability that Zaidi and the union were concerned about. Once amahs were on private contracts, these avenues of restitution would vanish.

Three thousand amahs were members of the union in Malaysia, and almost all of them voted to go on strike on October 1, 1963, in protest over the plan to transfer them to private contracts with individual servicemen. The strike would affect army, navy and air force service homes in Penang, Butterworth, Johore Bahru, Kluang, Sungei Patani, Cameron Highlands, Taiping, and Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysian government appealed to the patriotism of the amahs and their union. Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman suggested that strained diplomatic relations with Indonesia and the Philippines meant that it was less than an ideal time to strike.[45] The formation of Malaysia in September 1963 had provoked resentment and opposition from Indonesia, and heralded the beginning of the two-year period of Konfrontasi between Indonesia and Malaysia. The union claimed that they called off the strike "in a show of solidarity with the Government because of Indonesia's confrontation policy."[46] Ironically, Konfrontasi would ultimately prolong the British military presence in Malaysia, although Indonesian trade blockades did lead to unemployment in ports such as Singapore and Penang, and made the civilian jobs with Commonwealth military services even more desirable than before.

Talks between the union and the British War Department continued throughout late 1963 and into 1964, with acrimony on both sides and constant threats of strike action. After almost a year of talks, no agreement could be reached, and in June 1964, the British Army public relations arm released a statement on behalf of all British, Australian, and New Zealand services in Malaysia. Amahs would receive an ex gratia payment on their termination from service employment, depending on the length of their employment by service families. Amahs were expected to receive approximately $700 each, at a cost of $2 million.[47] The British congratulated themselves on this initiative, considering it an "exceptional measure" because they had not been required to pay them under existing regulations. The payments therefore reflected "an earnest desire of the Services to make the change to the new arrangements as smoothly and with as little personal hardship as possible."[48]

The amahs' cause in Malaya had support from other Malay nationalists. It had been taken up by Senator Che Aishah Gahni, who met with the Deputy British

High Commissioner, Mr. J R A Bottomley, in Kuala Lumpur in mid-1964.[49] A more establishment figure than Zaidi, Aishah Gahni was a long-standing member of the United Malay Nationalist Organisation (UMNO), a feminist, a former journalist who had trained in the United Kingdom, and an unusually prominent female politician in Malaysia.[50] While the English-language dailies frequently reported union interventions in the amah issue, Aishah Ghani's contribution was reported only in the vernacular press. She appears to have smoothed tensions between the Commonwealth Services and the WDCSA, and in June 1964, the Command Secretary W.T. Horsley and representatives from WDCSA met in Malacca and agreed to a joint statement about employment expectations. Horsley, who was overtly hostile to codifying conditions of service for amahs, was very clear that the terms were advisory only, and that he had only agreed to meet the WDCSA on these terms because the union was recognized for other purposes and they were required to deal with them more broadly.[51] The services would maintain a list of previously employed amahs and accept nominations from the WDCSA for new employees. The suggestions included a forty-eight-hour week, one day off per week, one week's annual leave, eleven paid public holidays, and sick leave. Five dollars per week would be payable to an Employees Provident Fund.[52]

The services were insistent the guidelines were advisory only, that amahs need not be members of the union, that matters of employment were between individuals and their amahs, and that Commanding Officers "should in no circumstances deal with the Union on representations about advice given to soldiers generally." They should not be drawn into making general statements and should always remind the WDCSA that the individual soldier was the employer.[53] The guidelines were specifically designed so that the WDCSA had limited access to servicemen. There were also strict guidelines around the WDCSA's ability to enter the home of servicemen and their families. A union representative was only allowed to contact an amah or her employer before 7pm, and enter the home only if invited; otherwise they were to remain in the garden. A serviceman's wife could only be approached if the serviceman himself was on a "prolonged absence" presumably on active duty, and the Civil Labour Officer must be present. "In simplified terms," the advice concluded, "a soldier's house is his home and as such it is he and he alone who says who can enter it."[54]

Singapore

The British thought that the amah issue may be less controversial in Singapore than it had been in Malaya, although given the fraught, recent history of labor relations on the island, that view seemed naïve at best. Under the terms of the merger between Singapore and Malaya, Singapore retained autonomy in matters of labor and education. Hence, there would need to be a separate agreement forged with the Singapore government about the amah issue. One official was sanguine that amahs in Singapore were not so highly unionized as in Malaya.[55] The previously little-known Singapore European Employees Union (SEEU) nevertheless stepped into the breech once the threat of dismissal from service employment loomed, and claimed to speak on behalf of the ten thousand women who worked as service amahs, while fudging the issue of how many amahs were actually members of the union.[56] The British High

Commission's office considered this union to be "an extreme left wing union" that had little standing within the service employees community.[57] They derided it as belonging to the political tradition of unionization directed toward "masses of people such as those whose conditions can scarcely be codified."[58] With a small membership, it was indeed one of the few remaining after the Singapore government had de-registered a swathe of left-wing unions in 1963, and it was allied with the Singapore Association of Trade Unions, the more left-wing of the two umbrella groups for unions in Singapore. Union activists viewed it as the perfect vehicle to reignite their campaign for worker's rights, which they saw as under attack in a climate of a "disorganised, confused labour situation" in the wake of the strike-breaking activity of the Singapore government.[59]

SEEU's labor advisor, recruited specifically to assist with the amah issue, was Michael Fernandez, an Indian-born union activist in his late twenties. Fernandez, a Catholic, arrived in Malaya in 1948, when he was still a teenager, to live with his brother who was an assistant estate manager at a rubber plantation in Kuala Selangor. Unlike his brother, who was decidedly pro-British, Fernandez was critical of the racial stratifications he witnessed on the estate, and was more influenced by his anti-British cousins, one of whom had been in the Indian National Army during the war. After moving to Singapore to become a student-teacher, Fernandez became president of the Singapore Catholic Student-Teachers' Guild and was energized by the regional student politics of the mid-1950s. Prevented by the Singapore government from attending the 1956 Asian-African Students Conference in Bandung, he later reflected that "the tide of Afro-Asianism was a feeling of solidarity all over the world against the British. Young people like us felt it was a healthy thing that we should support."[60] By the early 1960s, having cut his teeth in socialist student politics, Fernandez was politically aligned with the Barisan Sosialis.[61] He was also former general secretary of the Naval Base Labour Union, which had conducted a major strike against the British Admiralty in October 1963. To end the strike, the Singapore government had deregistered the Naval Base Labour Union, which also suited their broader agenda to break the power of the Barisan Sosialis. The Singapore government and the British High Commission were united in their distrust and dislike of Fernandez.[62]

Despite an extreme reluctance to enter negotiations with the SEEU, or to legitimate its place in the dispute, the British authorities met with the SEEU delegation in early September 1964 in Kuala Lumpur, the federal capital. Fernandez had managed to expand his team, which now included Miss Kuah Bak Kheong, president of the SEEU; Lim Song Seng, secretary of the Amahs' Action Committee, and three amahs—Lim Siok Kim, employed at the Royal Air Force Tengah Base, Tan Lang Eng, and The Mui Kheng, employed by British Army families. Miss Kuah told the press that the SEEU had been forced to appeal to the British High Commission because the union's attempts to resolve the issue with the Singapore Labour Ministry, the War Department, and the Commonwealth Services had failed. She stated that the Singapore government had "an indifferent attitude to the livelihood and future of the Amahs."[63] In the meeting, Fernandez claimed that although the SEEU had not previously represented amahs, they had been flooded with applications once the services had flagged a changed in their employment status. He accepted that

amahs would no longer be employed by the services directly, but now sought to negotiate their conditions and ensure that the services were prepared to deal with the SEEU as the amahs' representative. The SEEU's object was to ensure that as Singapore amahs transitioned out of government employment, they achieved the same benefits granted to amahs in mainland Malaysia. Of equal significance, the SEEU tried to insist that if individual servicemen were employees of amahs, they would be subject to Singapore labor legislation such as the Industrial Relations Ordinance.[64] If true, an amah might bring a case against an individual employer in the Industrial Court. One British official thought it was clear that "the SEEU is out to cause trouble, and … there is every indication that … it will use the Industrial Relations Ordinance to deliberately embarrass Jek, the Singapore Minister of Labour, as well as ourselves."[65]

There were historical differences in the employment of amahs in Malaya and Singapore that the service authorities were keen to maintain, in part to prevent any sense of solidarity between them. They were conscious that workers only joined unions when there were representative bodies that could accept conditions, and that these were uniform conditions that could be enforced. Indeed, the absence of agreed upon conditions of service "have made it almost impossible in every country to organise domestic servants," and it was best to leave conditions "as indeterminate as possible" precisely to avoid such organization.[66] In this view, the services received the support of the deputy high commissioner, who added that the communist unions were "infinitely more dangerous" in Singapore than Malaysia.[67] In Singapore, the conditions of service for amahs had been left entirely to the soldier, there had never been any list of amahs maintained by the Civil Establishment and Pay Office, and no amah had ever complained about her conditions, at least officially. If authorities were now to introduce some kind of list of potential amahs that servicemen might employ, or if they were to provide formal advice to soldiers where none had existed before, it would be tantamount to "offering the ground on which to fight a battle."[68] The deputy high commissioner in Singapore was of the firm belief that the unions were "concerned more to attack the British than to defend amahs' real interests" and thought the existence of Industrial Arbitration in Singapore "complicates things."[69]

The existence of an Industrial Arbitration Tribunal in Singapore increased the stakes in the amah issue, because authorities worried that publications of guidelines around conditions of service might ultimately lead to their codification. The ramifications of doing so would be difficult to control, potentially lead to "embarrassing political difficulties" according to the British command secretary, and "we would certainly not be very popular with the European community if . . . a code of conditions for amahs became enforced on European employers."[70] The Singapore Ministry of Labour might not be happy either, because amahs were not at that time included in the Singapore Employment Ordinance, and a codification of their conditions might prompt that outcome. The provision of any advice or guidelines to servicemen would inevitably deliver the SEEU the stoush for which they were spoiling. The Army Commander Singapore Base Area was not supportive of imposing conditions for the employment of amahs because the change had been made with relatively little difficulty and "they would find it incomprehensible if we were to court a Malayan-type

battle."[71] Within weeks, advice was received that an amendment to the Industrial Relations Ordinance was most likely to render employment of domestic servants outside its provisions.[72]

The British High Commissioners' Office described the amah issue in Singapore as a "ticklish situation," which it would prefer to bury.[73] Both the Singapore Ministry of Labour and the British were concerned to minimize the role of the union and the impact of its campaign. Given the existing disruption to Singapore's economy caused by blockades trigged by Konfrontasi, the minister was worried about potential for unemployment or reduced wages, and feared how the public would react to the change, although the British noted after meeting with him that at no point did he actually request that the service reconsider their decision to privatize the arrangements.[74] Archival documents make clear that the subsequent "exchange of letters" about the issue between Mr Jek Yeun Thong, the Minister for Labour in Singapore, and the Headquarters of the Far East Air Force were carefully stage-managed affairs, with the contents agreed to beforehand.[75] The British would explain why it had become necessary to alter employment arrangements, and the Ministry for Labour would seek the assurances of the British services of their good intentions and their efforts to minimize the impact of the new system.[76] The British high commissioner gave clear advice to his deputy in Singapore that amahs should receive the same rate of wages and conditions as before, the services should encourage servicemen to do so, and there was no valid reason why Singapore amahs should not have the benefit of similar "carry over" conditions to those already agreed to for the amahs in Malaysia. "Please urge these points on Service authorities." He further noted that "any concession the service authorities feel able to extend . . . should of course not be seen to be the result of S.E.E.U. activity" and further "that any credit for twisting the services arm should presumably go to Singapore Minister of Labour and such concessions included in the exchange of letters."[77]

While the high commissioner, the services, and Singapore's Ministry of Labour may not have been up for a "Malayan-type battle," and effectively made sure they won the war, the same could not be said of the leadership of SEEU. The critique widened to become a more general statement of anticolonial principles. "For hundreds of years, the British capitalists have been exploiting the workers of Singapore and Malaya," the SEEU complained to the Malaysian premier, and noted that "our colonial masters" had excluded themselves from legal obligations under labor legislation. It pointed to the contrast between the treatment of amahs being dismissed from the War Department, and the handsome compensation paid to British expatriates when the civil service was Malaysianized and their jobs began to be redistributed to local candidates. The SEEU also bundled up the issues faced by amahs into the more general question of the wages and conditions of workers in Singapore. "We should ask ourselves why should our women work in the European's houses?" They did so because average worker's wages were extremely low. "That is why our women wash, cook, sweep and care for the children of the Europeans, in order to supplement the family income."[78] The very same day that he composed and sent this letter, September 11, 1964, Michael Fernandez was arrested in Singapore.[79] Already a marked man as a consequence of his involvement in the Naval Base Dispute, Fernandez's continuing connection with Barisan Sosialis and his amah activism

did him no further favors. Detained without trail under the Internal Security Act, first in Outram Road Goal and then at Changi, Michael Fernandez would also have his citizenship revoked and remain in prison for the next nine years.

Conclusion

In both Malaysia and Singapore, the official response to amah activism centered around a denial of the claim that individual domestic servants employed in individual homes could be represented by a union. Michael Fernandez wanted both the British services and the Singapore Ministry of Labour to accept the SEEU as the amahs' official bargaining representative, a status he was consistently and deliberately denied. Similarly, the sticking point in negotiations between the WDCSA and service authorities in Malaya had been a refusal to formalize their relationship. As Mr. W.T. Horsley, command secretary (Far East) put it: "the whole issue between the Union over twelve months was precisely the fact that we would not agree specific conditions, nor, even less, impose them to remain as a party with whom the WDSCA can negotiate on amahs."[80] While they remained employees of the British War Department, amahs' interests could be represented by the WDCSA, but the British knew this had a time limit and let the clock tick down to July 1, 1964, when the new, privatized arrangements came into force in Malaysia. Fewer amahs were members of civilian employee unions in Singapore, and the struggle there was less sustained. The peak of the SEEU's activism in Singapore happened after the horse had bolted—service amahs there ceased to be British War Department employees on August 31, 1964—and both the British and the Singapore Ministry of Labour made sure they received sound legal advice that cases concerning individual employment contracts of amahs could not be brought before the Industrial Relations Tribunal, and that they were not required to codify conditions after negotiations with the SEEU.

The campaign had seen some small victories, but the bigger battle was lost. It is unclear how many amahs were active members of WDCSA in Malaysia before they were informed that their employment status was scheduled to change; thereafter amahs began to agitate in their thousands, and participate in WDCSA actions, as the street march through Kuala Lumpur in September 1963 made clear. Public protest, complying with the prime minister's request to call off the planned strike in light of Indonesia's growing hostility to the new nation, and the intervention of a feminist senator from the ruling UMNO party probably combined to win the amahs an ex gratia termination payment—although the greater prize, which would have been continuing and enforceable standards and conditions of service, remained elusive. The ex gratia payment was also extended to amahs in Singapore, but they too were excluded from broader labor protections. This had been the intention all along, for officials were cognizant that recognizing a union for domestic servants on individual contracts, and codifying employment conditions for the sector as a whole, had ramifications beyond the service amahs who had undergone a change from public to private employment. Service amahs, after all, while numerous, were just one subset of a broader population of domestic servants in Malaysia and Singapore. The Singapore Ministry of Labour was clear it had no appetite to bring domestic servants within the remit of its employment ordinances.

Although the repression of union activity was stronger in Singapore than Malaysia in the early 1960s, legislative measures introduced there in the 1950s did provide a modicum of solace. Amahs in private employment in Singapore had a safety net. In 1953, the government of Singapore established the Central Provident Fund, which deducted 5 percent of pay from employees' salary, and required employers to contribute 5 percent of their employees' wages to this state-controlled fund.[81] Once a worker turned fifty-five, or if they were permanently incapacitated, they could access these funds in a lump-sum, tax-free payment. Although domestic servants were originally excluded from the fund for "administrative reasons," by 1955, the government confirmed that domestic servants were entitled to participate in the fund, and henceforth employers should make contributions on their behalf. Amahs were required to themselves to contribute to the fund only if they earned more than $200 per month, which most of them did not.[82] In Malaysia, by contrast, domestic servants were not included in the Employment Provident Fund Ordinance 1951, and they did not receive similar benefits.[83] The farsighted measure provided some Singapore amahs with security in their retirement. By the mid-1970s, there were concerns expressed in the local press that there were former amahs who were not aware of their entitlements that had accrued during the postwar years under the Central Provident Fund. "Madame E," a sixty-eight-year-old former amah, was not among them. Upon receiving her money, Madame E had taken a trip to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, then deposited the remaining $9,000 of her entitlement with the benevolent trust of a Chinese temple. This entitled her to accommodation, food and clothing from the trust, and ultimately her cremation and funeral expenses.[84]

In Singapore and Malaysia, greater education for women and girls, the growth of manufacturing industry, and more diverse employment options meant that by the 1980s, locally-born women had left the ranks of domestic service for better paid work and better conditions in other industries. Any remaining "black and white" amahs had for the most part retired or returned to China. The amah phenomenon was largely over by the 1980s, although the demand for domestic servants in Singapore and Malaysia remained, and maids from the Philippines and Indonesia migrated to fulfill it. Despite the efforts of union organizers in the 1960s, they remain largely without protections. One of the ironies of the "amah strike" explored in this paper, is that employment by the British War Department in Singapore and Malaya during the 1950s and 1960s, while no guarantee of respectful treatment or reasonable hours, did offer at least some conditions of service and capacity for union representation, unlike the open labor market of the postcolonial state. The privatized and individualized nature of employment has militated against collectivism, and domestic workers' vulnerability is sometimes compounded by intentional exclusion from national labor protections.[85] Domestic workers, most commonly women and girls, are among the world's most vulnerable employee populations. In 2011, the International Labor Organisation created the Convention on Domestic Workers to establish labor standards for domestic workers; a review a decade later revealed that while legal protections had improved in some countries, more than 80 percent of the world's almost seventy-six million domestic workers remain in informal employment.[86]

Notes

1. Bridget Anderson, *Worker, Helper, Auntie, Maid? Working conditions and attitudes experienced by migrant domestic workers in Thailand and Malaysia* (Geneva, 2016).
2. Singapore was granted independence in 1963, and along with North Borneo and Sarawak merged with the independent Federation of Malaya, to form the Federation of Malaysia in the same year. Malaysia expelled Singapore in 1965, after which Singapore became an independent republic.
3. Ah Eng Lai, *Peasants, Proletarians and Prostitutes: A Preliminary Investigation into the work of Chinese women in colonial Malaya* (Singapore, 1986); Ooi Keat Gin, "Domestic Servants Par Excellence: the black and white amahs of Malaya and Singapore with special reference to Penang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 65, no. 2 (1992): 69–84; Diana Wong, "Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 5, no.1 (1996): 117–38; Christine B.N. Chin, *In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project* (New York, 1998); Ooi Keat Gin, "From *amah-chieh* to Indonesian maids: A comparative study in the context of Malaysia, 1930s-1990s," in *Proletarian and Gendered Mass Migrations: A Global Perspective on Continuities and Discontinuities from the 19th to the 21st Centuries*, Dirk Hoeder and Amarjit Kaur, eds. (Leiden, Netherlands, 2013) 405–25; Maria Platt, "Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore: Historical and Contemporary Reflections on the Colonial Politics of Intimacy," in *Colonization and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie, eds. (London, 2014) 131–45.
4. B.W. Higman, "An Historical Perspective: Colonial Continuities in the Global Geography of Domestic Service," in *Colonization and Domestic Service*, Haskins and Lowrie, eds., 19; Ishita Chakravarty and Deepita Chakravarty, "For Bed and Board Only: women and girl children domestic workers in post-partition Calcutta (1951–1981)," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2013): 581–611.
5. *Straits Times*, September 21, 1963, 11.
6. While "ayah" was a term commonly used in South Asia and especially India to describe female maid-servants and nannies, in Southeast Asia "amah" was the more common term to describe a female domestic servant who undertook a combination of child care, cooking and cleaning, and frequently all three. The word appears to have a variety of linguistic roots. The *Oxford English Dictionary* and Ooi Keat Gin, "Domestic Servants par excellence," 69, footnote 1, state that amah is derived from the Portuguese term for a wet nurse "*ama*." Kenneth Gaw, *Superior Servants: The Legendary Cantonese Amahs of the Far East* (Singapore, 1988), 87, states that amah is a Romanized version of the Cantonese word for mother or wet nurse.
7. For a detailed individual case study see Jocelyn Armstrong, "Twenty Years of Domestic Service: A Malaysian Chinese Woman in Charge," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 24, no. 1 (1996): 64–82.
8. Raffaella Sarti, "Freedom and Citizenship? The Legal Status of Servants and Domestic Workers in Comparative Perspective (16th-21st Centuries)" in *Proceedings of the "Servant Project"*, vol. 3, S. Pasleau and I. Schopp, with R. Sarti, eds., (Liege, 2005), 127–64; Nitin Sinha, "Who is (Not) a Servant, Anyway? Domestic Servants and Service in Early Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 1 (2021): 153–5.
9. Willard A. Hanna, *The Formation of Malaysia: New Factor in World Politics* (New York, 1964), 63.
10. On trade unions and the anticolonial agenda, see Michael Fernandez and Loh Kah Seng, "The Left-Wing Trade Unions in Singapore, 1945–70," in *Paths not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki, eds. (Singapore, 2008) 206–26; Gareth Curless, "The People Need Civil Liberties: trade unions and contested decolonisation in Singapore," *Labor History* 57, no. 1 (2016): 53–70.
11. The key archival file is The National Archive (TNA) Dominions Office (DO) 187/44 Service Amahs in Singapore – Proposals to withdraw public funds for their employment; newspapers consulted include English-language *Straits Times* and *Malaya Times* and the Malay-language *Berita Harian*. Oral history interview with Michael Fernandez, May 25, 1981, National Archives of Singapore, Accession Number 76.
12. Gaw, *Superior Servants,* 105.
13. Catherine Gomes, "Nationhood and Selective Memory: A case study of the official remembering of the Cantonese black and white amah," in *Women and the Politics of Representation in Southeast Asia: Engendering Discourse in Singapore and Malaysia*, Adeline Koh and Yu-Mei Blasingamchow, eds. (Abindgon, 2015) 102–3. For publicity given to return journeys of amahs to China, see *Singapore Free Press,* April 16, 1960, 5.

14. Claire Lowrie, *Masters and Servants: Cultures of Empire in the Tropics* (Manchester, 2016), 185.
15. Julia Martinez, Claire Lowrie, Frances Steel, and Victoria Haskins, *Colonialism and Male Domestic Service Across the Asia-Pacific* (London, 2018), 195–217; Lowrie, *Masters and Servants,* 132–53.
16. Chin, *In Service and Servitude,* 69–78; Ooi, "Domestic servants par excellence," 72–74.
17. Kin Wah Chin, *The Defence of Malaysia and Singapore: The Transformation of a Security System 1957–1971* (Cambridge, 1983): Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore 1941–1968* (Surrey, 2001).
18. Michael Barr, *Singapore: A Modern History* (London, 2019), 115–7.
19. The approach of the trade union movement to decolonization was complex: Curless, "The People Need Civil Liberties," 53–70.
20. *Ninth Report from the Estimates Committee Together With part of the Minutes of Evidence Taken before Sub-Committee D and Appendices, Sessions 1963–64, Military Expenditure Overseas* (London, 1964), House of Commons, Reports of Committees, Paper Number 30, q. 508, p. 85. On the role of this committee, see Nevil Johnson, *Parliament and Administration: The Estimates Committee 1945–1965* (London, 1966).
21. Personal: Draft letter to the Minister for Labour from Cecil James, Financial Adviser and Civil Secretary, HQ FEAF ca. September 5, 1964 in The National Archive (TNA) Dominions Office (DO) 187/44 Service Amahs in Singapore – Proposals to withdraw public funds for their employment.
22. Nupur Chaudhuri, "Memsahibs and their Servants in Nineteenth Century India," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4 (1994): 549–62; Indira Sen, "Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-nurses and Memsahibs in Colonial India," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 3 (2009): 299–328; "Memorandum submitted by the Ministry of Defence, 30 January 1964," in *Ninth Report from the Estimates Committee* 161.
23. Personal: Draft letter to the Minister for Labour from Cecil James, ca. September 5, 1964.
24. *Straits Time,* March 28, 1948, 1.
25. *Ninth Report from the Estimates Committee* ix.
26. *Ninth Report from the Estimates Committee*, q. 1172, p. 184.
27. *Ninth Report from the Estimates Committee*, lxi
28. *Ninth Report from the Estimates Committee*, q. 1201, p. 188.
29. Personal: Draft letter to the Minister for Labour from Cecil James, ca. September 5, 1964.
30. SECRET: Extract from BHCSLC (64) 5th Meeting Held on June 27, 1964, TNA DO187/44.
31. Personal: Draft letter to the Minister for Labour from Cecil James, ca. September 5, 1964.
32. Mr W.T. Horsley to Mr Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964 TNA DO187/44.
33. Personal: Draft letter to the Minister for Labour from Cecil James, ca. September 5, 1964.
34. *Straits Times,* September 26, 1963, 5.
35. *Straits Times,* August 13, 1963, 8.
36. *Straits Times,* August 11, 1963, 4.
37. Obituary, *New Straits Times*, November 17, 2011, 21.
38. *Straits Times,* August 17, 1963, 11.
39. K. Baskaran, "3000 amahs to go on strike," ca. 1964, online at commsmuseum.co.uk.
40. *Straits Times*, September 18, 1963, 5.
41. *Straits Times*, September 21, 1963, 11.
42. *Straits Times*, September 21, 1963, 11.
43. *Straits Times*, September 21, 1963, 11.
44. *Straits Times*, August 10, 1963, 13.
45. *Berita Harian,* September 25, 1963, 5; October 5, 1963, 1; October 7, 1963, 1; October 8, 1963, 8.
46. *Straits Times*, October 26, 1963, 12.
47. *Straits Times*, June 10, 1964, 6.
48. Personal: Draft letter to the Minister for Labour from Cecil James, ca. September 5, 1964.
49. *Berita Harian,* June 17, 1964, 10; *Berita Harian,* June 18, 1964, 5.
50. Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in their own right, feminists ahead of their time," in *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting, eds. (Singapore, 2013), 147–74. Aishah Ghani, *Memoir Seorang Pejuang* [*Memoirs of a Fighter*] (Kuala Lumpur, 1992).
51. Mr. W.T. Horsley to Mr. Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964.
52. *Straits Times,* June 28, 1964, 13.

53. "Amahs Employed by Soldiers," July 6, 1964, TNA DO187/44.
54. "Appendix A: Access by union officials to amahs and their employers," Mr. W.T. Horsley to Mr. Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964.
55. SECRET: Extract from BHCSLC (64) 5th Meeting Held on June 27, 1964.
56. *Malaya Times*, September 3, 1964.
57. Telegram from Deputy High Commissioner, Singapore, September 1, 1964, TNA DO187/44.
58. Mr. W.T. Horsley to Mr. Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964.
59. Oral history interview with Michael Fernandez, May 25, 1981, National Archives of Singapore, Accession Number 76, Transcript: Reel 16, p. 174.
60. Oral history interview with Michael Fernandez, Reel 5, p.56.
61. Edgar Liao, Cheng Tju Lim and Guo-Quan Seng, *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (Amsterdam, 2012), 68.
62. Y.E. Confidential: Delegation about service amahs, J R A Bottomley, September 1, 1964, TNA DO 187/44.
63. *Malaya Times*, September 3, 1964.
64. D.J. King to Mr. F. Mills, BHC Singapore, September 18, 1964, TNA DO 187/44.
65. "Service Amahs in Singapore": Note of a meeting with a delegation from the Singapore European Employees Union. Prepared by HGL Poppitt, September 2, 1964. TNA DO 187/44.
66. Mr. W.T. Horsley to Mr. Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964.
67. Deputy High Commissioner, Singapore to British High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, September 12, 1964, TNA DO 187/44.
68. Mr. W.T. Horsley to Mr. Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964, TNA DO1874/44 Amahs – Singapore
69. Deputy High Commissioner, Singapore to British High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, September 12, 1964.
70. Mr. W.T. Horsley to Mr. Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964.
71. Mr. W.T. Horsley to Mr. Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964.
72. D J King, British High Commission to F. J. Mills, British High Commission, Singapore, September 18, 1964.
73. Telegram from Deputy High Commissioner, Singapore, September 1, 1964.
74. "Amahs – Discussion with Singapore Minister of Labour," TNA DO 187/44.
75. Jek Yeun Thong, Minister for Labour, Singpore to Mr. T C G "Cecil" James, Financial Adviser and Civil Secretary, HQ FEAF, September 1, 1964. The content of the letter was "agreed beforehand between Jake and Cecil (and us)," F. Mills, British High Commission to D.J. King, British High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, September 6, 1964, TNA DO 187/44 Amahs – Singapore.
76. Mr. James to Mr. King, August 27, 1964.
77. Confidential Outward Telegram, British High Commission Kuala Lumpur to Deputy High Commissioner, Singapore, September 4, 1964, TNA DO 187/44.
78. Michael Fernandez (advisor), Lim Song Seng (Secretary, Action Committee), Kuah Bak Kheong, President, Singapore European Employees' Union, to Malaysian Premier, September 11, 1964, TNA DO 187/44.
79. Deputy High Commissioners, Singapore to British High Commissioner, Kuala Lumpur, September 12, 1964.
80. Mr. W.T. Horsley to Mr. Mills, BHC Singapore, Confidential, September 9, 1964.
81. *Straits Times,* November 28, 1953, 4.
82. *Straits Times*, October 11, 1955, 9.
83. Domestic workers were also excluded from the Employee Social Security Ordinance 1969 and the Workmen's Compensation Act 1952, see Chin, *In Service and Servitude,* 84.
84. *Straits Times,* May 15, 1977, 9.
85. Anderson, *Worker, Helper, Auntie, Maid.*
86. International Labor Office, *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers: progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)*, (Geneva, 2021), vxii.

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